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**Intercultural encounters as socially constructed experiences:  
Which concepts? Which pedagogies?**

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**Intercultural encounters as socially constructed experiences:  
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Intercultural encounters in the workplace are frequently plurilingual, intercultural, socially-constructed interactions that are situated in time, place, space, and purpose. Competence in one encounter can very quickly manifest as incompetence in another supposedly similar context. This complexity puts into question formulaic, essentialist models of intercultural communication and competence that have characterised much cross-cultural business/management education. While these approaches provide some insights into behaviour and communication of people in “Culture X”, they often result in stereotyping, grounded in ethnocentric and prejudiced attitudes; and this stereotyping, in turn, may lead to “othering”.

One response to these static models of how culture is understood has seen the rise in popularity of theories and models of intercultural competence, often subscribing to the idea that communication with (cultural) others should be both “appropriate” and “effective” to enable individuals to “achieve their goals”. This position is exemplified in the definition offered by Spitzberg and Changnon (2009)—which emerged from their in their seminal synthesis of multiple models of intercultural competence—as “the appropriate and effective management of interaction between people who, to some degree or another, represent different or divergent affective, cognitive, and behaviour orientations to the world” (p. 7). Thus, the term “intercultural competence” and the variety of models, frameworks, and theories in its name, have come to be seen by some in the cross-cultural communication literature as both a panacea and a solution when interacting with people from other cultures.

In this chapter I begin by outlining some reasons why traditional cross-cultural management education and training approaches are no longer appropriate in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and some shortcomings of the theoretical concept “intercultural competence”. I discuss how terms like “culture” and “identity”, when no longer treated as solid and static states, and multilingualism offer possibilities for new understandings of intercultural encounters. In my own teaching approach I encourage students to engage in practices and in research and assessment tasks that invite them to move beyond a preoccupation with aggregate and/or static models of culture and cultural differences. By drawing on social constructionism as a theoretical standpoint for understanding and experiencing intercultural encounters, I provide a possible pedagogy and possible assessment approach that invites learners to consider more deeply the nature of intercultural encounters, and simultaneously, monitor their own intercultural communication within them.

## **THE LIMITS OF TRADITIONAL APPROACHES TO CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION**

The need for frameworks for understanding culture and difference emerged with the deployment of foreign nationals to other countries in the wake of World War II (Martin & Nakayama, 2012). Several cultural values frameworks emerged and have remained popular in cross-cultural management education (e.g., Hall, 1976; Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 1998; Hofstede, 1980; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorman & Gupta, 2004; Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck, 1961). These cultural dimensions frameworks tended to conceptualise culture as bounded, and adhering to rule-based patterns of beliefs, values, and communication norms. The shared value orientations (or dimensions) represented the most deeply felt beliefs shared by a cultural group and a shared perception of what ought to be, rather than what is (Martin & Nakayama, 2012). The frameworks, informed by social science approaches, permit generalisations and predictions about communication and behaviour within a particular culture (or nation state); however, Hofstede (1980) warned that his cultural dimensions model should not be used for predictive work. Further social science approaches include Gudykunst’s (2005) anxiety uncertainty management theory, and Ting-Toomey’s (2005) face negotiation theory which uses variables of collectivism and individualism to measure face negotiation strategies used to manage or avoid conflict. Similarly, cross-cultural psychologists (e.g., Cushner & Brislin 1996; Pederson, 2001) have drawn on variables of nationality, ethnicity, personality, and gender to measure cultural difference.

Such models have been widely used in management diversity training (Landis et al, 2004). The training programmes that draw on them provide guidelines, rules, “how to” manuals, steps, progressions, and scales for self/other assessment (e.g., to demonstrate intercultural competence) or measurable learning outcomes. Such tangible evidence is important for organisations in justifying the application of these training programmes, or for universities in identifying pathways to developing students’ intercultural and global competencies for employability.

While such frameworks and categorisations may be useful as sense-making strategies for human behaviour, they are soon rendered unhelpful when people find that what worked in one time and place failed in the same place a day later, or what worked in one context also succeeded in quite a different context. Holliday, Hyde and Kullman (2004, p. 3) argue that such approaches lead to “otherisation” where the other is imagined as “alien and different to ‘us’ in such a way that ‘they’ are excluded from ‘our’ ‘normal’, ‘superior’ and ‘civilised’ group”. Furthermore, Hofstede’s work has already been heavily discredited methodologically (McSweeney, 2002) and theoretically, as drawing on Western-centric models that make sense of the other through an imperial and colonial gaze (Chuang, 2003). Intercultural communication is about establishing commonalities and similarities as well as boundaries, building bridges as well as isolating and negotiating points of difference, and engaging in conflict in order to recognise competing and partisan standpoints.

### **INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE: PANACEA OR PROBLEM?**

While the social science frameworks described above have been discredited and criticised, the concept of intercultural competence has emerged in the past 25 years as a *tour de force*. Spitzberg and Changnon’s (2009) definition (provided at the outset) addresses the focus in many models on the individual *per se* and individual traits, reflecting “decades of systems-theoretic perspectives” (p.7). By focusing on an individual’s goal achievement and end results, the definition responds to the limited attention paid to the emotional and relational aspects of (intercultural) communication and how people manage intercultural relations, and shared experience and understanding. Barrett (2011) highlights further problems with many of these models in that they have ethnocentric biases, e.g., they were developed in the US, tested in restricted and limited conditions (e.g., often among monocultural populations of students in large undergraduate university courses as data sources), and therefore lack cross-cultural generalizability. However, it could be argued that any model that attempts to provide

some kind of generalizability from one (cultural) context to another may in itself be problematic.

Perhaps the most influential model of intercultural competence has been that of Byram (1997). His model, conceived initially for application within the context of foreign language education, is constructed around five *savoirs* that reflect skills, knowledge, attitudes, behaviours, and critical cultural awareness. While the model is still highly influential internationally, Byram (2012) himself has gathered five criticisms of it as follows: the model 1) fails to adequately handle the affective dimension (for example, see Borghetti's 2011 analysis); 2) is considered structuralist, i.e., a set of stable *savoirs* that permit categorisation, whereas a post-structuralist account would see the *savoirs* as inseparable (see Kramsch, 2009); 3) treats language and culture as two separate entities (see Risager, 2007); 4) neglects nonverbal communication; and 5) presents a nationalistic and essentialist understanding of culture (see Belz, 2007). Finally, attempts to assess intercultural competence are under construction, but how to assess, in particular, the affective dimension, still remain unresolved (e.g., Fantini, 2009; Deardorff, 2009b and in press).

The *savoir* that has continued to gain attention has been *savoir s'engager* (the ability to interpret, evaluate and negotiate, on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices, and products in one's own and others' cultures, which may lead to some degree of acceptance of new ideas). This critical cultural awareness is important in becoming an "intercultural citizen" (Byram, 2008), who can reflect on intercultural encounters, behave and interact ethically, and take action to address issues of injustice. Porto's (2013) pedagogic study is illustrative of this concept in action. She describes an action research project to develop online intercultural citizenship experience. Through a comparative methodology that involved online interaction between 50 English foreign language teacher trainees in a university in Argentina and 30 Spanish language students in a university in the United Kingdom (UK). Students exchanged texts (e.g., photographs, posters, powerpoints, written reflection logs, videos, advertisements) concerning the Malvinas/Falklands war in 1982. Their exchanges were characterised by processes of comparing and contrasting at different levels (e.g., intergenerational, past/present orientations, differing points of view), de-centring (placing oneself outside of the context to engage in critical reflection), and critical evaluation and reflection. Through their exchanges they developed a critical perspective of these texts and an international identification and understanding of the war, different from their national and regional one. Porto noted that "the highest levels of criticality as in Barnett (1997) were

observed, namely the refashioning of traditions and the transformatory critique in action” (p. 257).

Despite the limitations and criticisms outlined above of Byram’s and others’ models of intercultural competence, their application is evidenced in multiple domains, e.g., management, healthcare, counselling, social work, education, and psychology. They continue to attract attention as training and measurement tools, but need cautionary treatment, given these limitations.

## **THE NEED FOR NEW CONCEPTUALISATIONS**

The phenomenon of globalisation challenges the usefulness of the above-discussed static models, and their accompanying notions of a bounded nation-state and “national culture”. Borders have become porous as people pass easily—and increasingly, uneasily—through them. Languages, religions, cultural practices and beliefs are relocated, reconstructed, negotiated, contested and endorsed among local people, migrants, traders, border guards and police, officials, translators and interpreters. Whether at borders, in the workplace, or in the community, these new social, political, and economic conditions of the 21<sup>st</sup> century require critical understandings of culture, identity, and language that question power positions and individuals’ rights of speech and representation (Krog, 2011). How people (re)present themselves in these complex spaces, and the (intercultural) communicative abilities they demand challenge the traditional theoretical and pedagogical approaches found in intercultural communication and cross-cultural management education.

### **Culture and representation**

Understandings of culture have become more complex. For example, Hannerz (1992) challenges the concept of culture as “enculturation” or learned patterns of behaviour, transmitted over time from generation to generation, shared by the people living in that group, and consisting of shared symbols and artefacts. According to Hannerz, individuals bring their ideas and modes of thought, developed throughout their life histories, to encounters. These are made accessible to others and to the public in communication, and in other creative ways, and then spread among local and more wide-spread populations and within and across social relationships. This situation therefore favours a post-modern conceptualisation of culture: one that accommodates complexity and fracture, displacement and replacement, (re)construction and (re)negotiation, and shaping and reshaping in accordance with flows of people and the languages, and the cultural practices they carry with

them (Grossberg, 1996; Risager, 2012). For example, Shi-xu (2001, p. 283) defines culture as:

... a set of *meaningful practices*, where meanings often have to do with such things as the origin, race, ethnicity, religion, language, nationality and patterns of thinking and acting, associated with a particular group of people from a particular geo-political place and historical time, and where practices are constituted in historically situated, social, largely discursive, interaction. In this sense, such meaningful practices are forms of cultural and historical subjectivity, as opposed to cultural ‘facts’ upheld by positivism.

Thus, the term “culture” calls for a broader understanding and consideration of a range of related concepts: multiple identities, essentialism, ethnocentrism, prejudice, power, hybridity (and its opposite, monoculturalism), difference (and similarity), agency (and group affiliation), and resistance (and compliance). In this light, understanding the meaning of culture, and how people choose to represent themselves within their own cultural community in intercultural encounters—anywhere—becomes a complex undertaking.

### **The multifaceted nature of identity**

A second complication lies in the complexity of identity. Critical understandings of identity (e.g., Hall, 1991; Holliday, 2010a; 2010b) recognize the multifaceted, relational, contingent, and contextual nature of an individual’s identity, acknowledging the influence of history, geography (region, locality), religion, nationality, language, ethnicity, gender, power, ethics, and less commonly discussed notions of social class/status, privilege/disadvantage, (dis)ability, education, emotion, kinship positions, and societal and family roles. Making sense of the interplay among these variables means that assigning identity markers to individuals becomes meaningless: identity is a fluid or liquid ambiguous concept (Bauman, 1996; Dervin, 2012), brought into being in interaction and through the relationships people hold with one another, whether proximate or distant. Holliday (2012; 2013) and Holliday et al. (2005) offer many case studies that illustrate how identity is assigned to individuals, usually erroneously, drawing on specific variables—particularly national, linguistic, ethnic—which can result in “otherising” or peripherising a person’s identity, rendering an individual feeling less than they are. Instead, he promotes the notion of critical cosmopolitan identities that allow individuals to perform their multiple roles and project a different, more authentic

image of who they are through their own agency and discursive practices. Teachers and practitioners are encouraged to draw on these examples in their teaching of intercultural communication.

### **Multilingualism and linguacultures**

Within the United States tradition of intercultural communication, Noels, Yashima and Zhang (2012) note that language is “at best tangential” in research, perhaps because the “use of one single, dominant language [English] is assumed” along with an “emphasis on the non-linguistic aspects of culture and communication during its formative years” (p. 59). This omission ignores the importance of the spread of languages in the context of globalisation. In fact, Risager (2012, p. 101) reminds us that “language is intimately related to nation, people, and culture”. Drawing on Hannerz’ ideas of cultural complexity and global cultural flows, she introduces the concept of “linguaculture”, suggesting that the ways in which languages are used and practised depends on the functions their users put them to in specific contexts, and also on the linguistic resources users bring, resources that are developed during a person’s socialisation and life history. Just like culture, people carry their linguistic resources from one cultural context to another. Rural-urban migrations and south-north shifts of peoples create hierarchies and struggles among language users for power and recognition (Bourdieu, 1991; Risager 2012). Examples of linguacultures are evidenced in Blommaert’s (2013) ethnographic study of a Belgian locality. Dutch linguistic forms, displayed in signage, merge with the languages of the people migrating into the community to respond to their social, cultural, religious, and economic needs. And Pennycook’s (2011) research on metrolingualism in workplaces in Sydney shows how workers use multiple languages in various contexts to carry out work and socially-related tasks. These studies illustrate how linguistic choice is informed by the micro-context of interactions, e.g., at local level in terms of languages in use in the community or workplace, or at the macro-level where the state often determines the language regime, e.g., in schools, and again, in the workplace (Piller, 2011).

To conclude, the conceptualisations of culture, identity and language described here open up new lines of investigation in cross-cultural management education, acknowledging the complexity and fluidity entailed in each concept. They render intercultural encounters as sites for mutual engagement where individuals perform appropriate identities and jostle for power and recognition of their multiple roles drawing on linguistic resources—both prescribed according to context, and improvised according to need. Understanding culture, language,



and identity as socially constructed in intercultural cultural communication offers new ways for understanding others, but more importantly, new ways for engagement and social inclusion.

## **BEYOND INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE: NEW CONCEPTS, NEW PEDAGOGIES**

Recent scholarship has addressed the concept of intercultural dialogue as a way of negotiating positions of difference and working through conflict towards peace, reconciliation, and democracy. However, the concept has been criticised for its failure to recognise the similarities people share in encounters, and its use as a tool to promote European integration and feelings of belonging within the EU (Hoskins & Sallah, 2012) and as a political instrument to manage cultural diversity and variation (Näss, 2010). Phipps (2014, p. 108) is strident in her critique:

[T]his concept is one which may work and make sense in stable, open and equal jurisdictions where there is relative ‘freedom from fear and want’, but . . . it is at best, limited and at worst, dangerous when used in situations of conflict and aggression and under the creeping conditions of precarity which mark out the present form of globalisation.

Further or alternative approaches have developed in response to the limitations of theories of intercultural competence, for example, by foregrounding ethics, social justice and responsibility. To this end, Crosbie (2014) has developed a capability approach, trialled as an action-research project among language learners, through content and language integrated learning in the English language classroom of an Irish university. She draws on Nussbaum’s idea of capabilities in democratic citizenship education, and Sen’s notion of individuals’ freedom in reasoning and decision-making. By emphasizing “the freedom and agency that an individual has to be and to act”, she encourages her learners to make ethically informed choices and respond to critical issues of social and ethical injustices. Ferri (2014), drawing on the work of Levinas, argues for an ethical model that acknowledges the interdependence of Self and Other, the role of power, and an awareness of the position of the self as a potential all-knowing subject capable of silencing others. This understanding of intercultural dialogue resonates strongly with calls for non-Euro/US-centric approaches to intercultural communication that point to the importance of relationality, harmony, and the circularity of

human existence (Miike, 2007). These approaches provide new ways of conceptualising and teaching intercultural communication.

In addition, in a previous publication (Holmes, 2012), I summarise more recent developments in management education. For example, several trainers and researchers have drawn on interpretive/experiential learning approaches, e.g., Mughan (2009) in his small- to medium-sized enterprises research, and Tomalin's (2009) learning cycle—activity, debrief, conclusion, implementation—drawing on Kolb's (1984) experiential learning modes. Others have explored critical intercultural action and reflexivity, e.g., Jack's (2009) critical work which invites his learners to examine and question the hegemony and cultural imperialism of the dominating colonial structures responsible for (Eurocentric) managerialism, and to develop in Foucault's terms, "practices of liberation" (1984, p. 102, as cited in Jack, 2009), that is, other ways of relating to oneself and others. A third theme—intercultural teamwork—encourages learners to appreciate the complexity of teamwork processes, the inherent ethnocentric values of team members, the range of emotional responses engendered by teamwork, and issues of resistance by engaging in learner/teacher dialogue and co-constructed learning (Cockburn-Wooten, Holmes, & Simpson, 2008). Guilherme, Glaser and Mendez-Garcia (2010) have initiated a model of intercultural responsibility that facilitates teamwork in intercultural teams in the context of the European workplace. They invite learners to "look for the Other in ourselves", to engage in a critical cycle of "reflective, exploratory, dialogical and active stance towards cultural knowledge and life" through processes of self and social discovery, and "linguaging" (p. 4).

This overview of approaches, related studies, and their critiques indicates that studying intercultural encounters is a complex matter which requires tools of understanding and interpretation that permit complex description and analysis. This new situation creates possibilities for researchers and teachers. In responding to these challenges I now turn to my own approach, where I draw on critical/interpretive theories and methodologies, to develop a pedagogy of intercultural encounters.

## **A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST APPROACH TO TEACHING INTERCULTURAL ENCOUNTERS**

How people interact with others, in whatever contexts, is very much influenced by the ability to recognise, but also bracket, one's own specific worldview (ontology), knowledge claims (epistemology), and understandings of the standard "rules" of intercultural engagement

(methodology). I understand intercultural communication as a socially constructed affair, where ways of speaking, doing, believing, and hoping are displayed, shared, and contested among interlocutors in the here and now. Much of this (reflexive) understanding has emerged from my own experiences as a teacher and researcher in diverse linguistic, cultural, historical, social and geographical locations, e.g., Italy, China, Austria, Hong Kong (Holmes, 2014). I see intercultural communication as characterised by how communicators understand and interpret the inter-relationship of notions of context, power, communication “rules” and rituals (see, for example, Holliday, 2012; Martin & Nakayama, 2012), and relationality (e.g., Miike, 2007). These understandings and interpretations guide interlocutors’ interactions, and in the process of communication, further (re)construction, (re)negotiation, and (re)presentation is likely: perspectives and understandings are upheld and/or modified through experience and interaction.

These understandings have helped me to realise that preparing people for working, living, and/or studying in another place requires a complex and nuanced tools and pedagogies. Learning about others, including significant others and neighbours, is a lifelong endeavour. I now describe two examples of “intercultural pedagogy”, one from my own research that invites learners to explore and reflect on the intercultural situations they encounter through student-centred teaching, learning, and research approaches, and another, a joint European project (Intercultural Resources for Erasmus Students and their Teachers (IEREST), which offers a suite of intercultural developmental and critical awareness-raising activities for a stay abroad.

The first research project focuses on developing students’ self-understanding of their intercultural capabilities through intercultural encounters with a cultural other. Students were assigned a research task requiring them to engage in extended intercultural interaction with someone from another culture over several encounters through processes of preparation, engagement, evaluation, and reflection—the PEER approach (Holmes and O’Neill, 2010; 2012). Drawing on their intercultural communication and experience in the context of those encounters, they then wrote an auto-ethnography of their experience in which they reflected on and evaluated their own intercultural competence. The findings from their auto-ethnographies suggested that defining, acquiring, and evaluating intercultural competence is complex, messy, and iterative. The findings indicated that communication is influenced and/or constrained by religious, cultural, ethnic, and value differences, and may involve (re)construction and (re)negotiation of an individual’s intercultural communication and

identity. The outcomes of the project indicated the importance of reflection on intercultural experience in understanding and assessing one's own competence. Further, the intercultural encounter proved to be a useful place for this experience.<sup>i</sup>

I have also used socially-constructed interactional assignments prior to this project. For example, business students in New Zealand and Israel produced and exchanged a 5-minute video clip of a sales presentation of an academic program in their university and then evaluated the video and exchanged responses for discussion and feedback. The project enabled students to understand the complex cultural interpretations individuals apply to professional texts and thus develop their potential in global professional communication.<sup>ii</sup> A second project required student researchers to undertake an e-mail and follow-up face-to-face interview with an immigrant to investigate how ICTs shaped the immigrants' communication practices, and consequently, how those practices impacted the settlement process (at work and socially). Students learned valuable research skills and interviewing techniques, how to manage intercultural interactions within the interviews, and how to build relationships through rapport and trust as they arranged and conducted the interviews (see Holmes and Janson, 2008, for an account of this pedagogy).

The second project, IEREST, consists of intercultural activities for pre-, during-, and post-stay abroad. The activities aim to expose mobile (Erasmus/international) students to understandings of interculturality that are reflected in the critiques I have raised earlier, and that question many of the long-standing assumptions in the field. The activities encourage students to understand culture as a fluid, socially constructed concept, that people hold multiple identities and choose when and how to perform these, and that power is central in intercultural communication encounters. The activities, drawing on video clips, texts, interviews, and students' own interactions and experience are informed by Kolb's (1984) modes of experiential learning. For example, in preparing for study abroad, students attend workshops to discuss and engage with concepts of stereotyping, essentialising, prejudice, racism (promulgated by media representations of others), and the narratives people tell of themselves or are told of them by others. They encourage students to critically reflect on their own engagement with others, but also on how understandings of others are socially constructed by the communicative practices of the people, organisations, and structures in society.<sup>iii</sup>

Through the experiences students gain from these research projects, and in their reflections on them, students are in a better position to take action, to work ethically and responsibly

with others through negotiated understandings. These projects enable them to develop a sense of self, including understandings of their own cultural, religious, historical, gendered, local/regional, etc. identity, an important transformative stage in developing responsible and ethical communication as global citizens. While these activities are designed for Erasmus students going abroad in particular, they could also be used to prepare other study abroad students for intercultural experience, and applied to other intercultural learning contexts, e.g., modules on intercultural communication/competence/encounters, promoting intercultural understanding and engagement in the context of internationalisation between international and non-international students, and developing intercultural competencies for employability in the (global) workplace.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have argued that complex patterns of migration, settlement, and mobility have resulted in communities of people who may or may not share languages, histories, geographical displacement and replacement, memory etc.; in the 21<sup>st</sup> century people must jostle for employment and social, economic, and political legitimacy in the face of stable and unstable governments, corporations, and organisations and language regimes. These unsettled times call into question the usefulness of earlier static and essentialist models of culture and cultural difference—the staples of intercultural communication textbooks and training programmes.

Instead, students need new ways of learning how to connect, work together and learn (Edwards and Usher 2008). Teachers need methods that allow their students to experience and explore intercultural interactions, to encounter similarity and difference in real life contexts. Students need ways of understanding of how interlocutors socially construct their own and others' identities in and through intercultural communication. This understanding can be developed by teachers providing real life opportunities for prolonged engagement with other people in communities, the workplace, or via study-abroad experience. I have offered several examples of student research activities and tasks that facilitate this approach. In addition, experiential activities found in vignettes, case studies, problem-solving activities, online or web-based training tools and online intercultural exchanges (e.g., O'Dowd 2007; Storti 2009) are useful in this aim.

However, teachers should evaluate all framework, models, and methods according to how they promote intercultural learning. They should eschew static, essentialist descriptions of

cultures and nations in favour of approaches that facilitate understandings of identity and culture as fluid, dynamic, and socially constructed, and that encourage critical questioning of positionality, power, and who speaks for whom in what language(s). Finally, teachers should select approaches and methods according to the insights that they evoke in learners about interculturality, rather than for “successful” intercultural communication. As Phipps (2012) reminds us, realising one’s own incompetence also creates new and other possibilities for engagement.

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<sup>i</sup> The details of how this research assignment for students was developed and taught is described in an earlier publication, Holmes & O'Neill (2010), which outlines the pedagogy and method employed with students; and a later publication, Holmes & O'Neill (2012), which provides a theoretical understanding of students' understandings of their own developing intercultural competence through a sustained series of intercultural encounters with a "cultural other".

<sup>ii</sup> See Zaidman and Holmes (2008) for an account of this study and its pedagogy.

<sup>iii</sup> The IEREST project has produced materials to prepare study-abroad students for intercultural interaction prior to their departure, once in their study abroad context, and then when they have returned to their home institution. More about the project and activities are available at <http://www.ierest-project.eu/>.